

# Sketching out the programmatic features of *Making Justice*: a library program dedicated to court-involved youth

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Comics by Lauren Lauter

**ABSTRACT:** This article sketches out programmatic features that contribute to the success of Making Justice, a public library community program for court-involved youth. This article features images from a collaboration with Lauren Lauter, an educational scholar and artist, alongside text to highlight three programmatic features: aesthetic expression, embracing the present, and reaching out and stepping back. In contrast to traditional forms of education, in particular carceral education, Making Justice offers much needed space for teens to express themselves through the arts and have access to resources allocated for their current enjoyment and wellbeing. This program is predicated on trust that learning can come in multiple forms, matter for multiple reasons, and be determined by the learners themselves.

Keywords: arts programming, comics, education, juvenile justice



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Educational institutions such as public schools and universities have, since the twentieth-century, been considered sites wherein mind/body cultivation can take place within state-sponsored systems (Baker, 2001). In the twenty-first century, we are witnessing a renewed commitment to learning outside of schooling, challenging which institutions count as educational. In this climate, library policy-makers and staff are positioning libraries as educational institutions, focusing their programs on learning, partnering with local schools and after-school programs, and re-framing librarians as educators (Gross, 2013).

Concomitantly, in recent years the arts have been systematically excluded from formal education and increasingly offered instead through alternative organizations (Rabkin, 2013). As a publicly funded not-for-profit site, the library offers enormous potential for resources, access, and opportunities to foster community engagement and self-expression via programs ranging from graphic and 3D art to photography to spoken word. It is in this context that I situate Making Justice, an arts-driven public library program dedicated to hands-on, peer-supported learning for court-involved youth.

In collaboration with community partners, Making Justice's weekly workshops serve over 500 teens annually, and an artist-in-residence program harnesses continued collaborations with a diverse spectrum of artists, educators, and activists. Making Justice engages multiple partners, primarily including on-site programs at the Juvenile Detention Center (JDC); offsite programs with teens in the Shelter School; and offsite programs for students who participate in the city's Neighborhood Intervention Programs (NIP). The Shelter Home is a program of the Dane County Juvenile Courts, and provides residential services for youth who do not require detention, but are in need a temporary place to stay. It includes an on-site school to support their educational needs. NIP, a Dane County Department of Human Services program, addresses "delinquency reduction and re-directive" through social and educational services for youth in the system (Dane County Department of Human Services). Teens who participate in Making Justice work towards final products in the form of art pieces and performances with workshop leaders who focus on relationship building and connection to the community.

Teens in the U.S. who are involved in the justice system are activity denied autonomy by the laws and policies carried out as they navigate courts and custody. Incarceration is intended to be both punitive and protective; adults who design and implement this system assume teens need to be controlled, directed, and closely supervised. Drawing boundaries to protect teens from society and society from them results in a deep lack of trust; e.g. in these sites the internet is restricted and pens are forbidden. Furthermore, educational systems such as

schools have become increasingly tasked with preparing students for job-readiness and market-based success as defined through neoliberal realities that pervade U.S. agencies, private institutions, and the public. When resources are allocated to teens who have strayed from the predestined vision of success as college and career, that funding is directed toward goals of getting them back on track. Success is determined by economic measures and there are increasing directives to ensure that educational systems are meeting this demand. The confluence of these goals from the justice and educational system has left teens with a dearth of opportunities to own their education, and to have educational experiences free from the pressures of societal expectations. Furthermore, incarceration is predicated on a past wrongdoing and a future of redemption with little regard for present joy and wellbeing. Making Justice, in contrast, offers much needed space for teens to express themselves freely; access to resources allocated for their current enjoyment and wellbeing; and trust that learning can come in multiple forms, matter for multiple reasons, and be determined by the learners themselves.

This essay draws on a synthesis of ongoing conversations, mediated by meeting notes and interview transcripts, and publicly available materials. From 2013–2017, I participated as one of three researchers engaged in design-based (DBRC, 2003) and ethnographic data collection methods as part of a collaborative effort to pilot and institutionalize Making Justice. I observed programs happening across the system, conducted monthly meetings with dedicated personnel, designed interventions to improve programmatic design and increase pathways for involvement, and interviewed a range of participants to study this approach to community programming and the learning therein. In this piece, I will sketch out three programmatic features that contribute to the success of Making Justice: aesthetic expression, embracing the present, and reaching out and stepping back. Images from a collaboration with comic artist Lauren Lauter accompany the text, illustrating foundational conversations between us about Making Justice programming.

## **The Story Behind Making Justice Programming**

(See [Comic 1, supplementary file](#))

To tell the story of Making Justice, I will focus on Jesse Vieau, instigator of Madison Public Libraries (MPL) programming for court-involved youth. In 2008, Vieau was the first Teen Services Librarian hired by MPL. Thanks to the culture of the institution—which was community-driven, service-oriented, and trusting of staff—he began to collaborate both

within and outside the library system with community partners and resource librarians, managers, and adult service staff to create new programming and acquire resources, such as animation stations and a media specialist who could facilitate digital media production for youth. By 2014, even amidst budget cuts, Teen Services had demonstrated the value of this work to management, and the library secured city funding for two additional Teen Services positions. Simultaneously, a team of library staff, including Vieau, MPL leadership, and University of Wisconsin-Madison professors, lecturers, and graduate students worked together on three different grant efforts, totaling over \$600,000. Funding came from federal and university sources, including an Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) National Leadership Grant to develop and sustain arts and maker programming across the library system, with two grants specifically geared towards expanding Vieau's programming dedicated to court-involved youth.

Thanks to IMLS and the growing number of collaborators dedicated to developing this program, Vieau describes the pace of the program's growth as, "hitting the seven-year plan in two years" (Interview, September 2017). The rapid growth of Making Justice is in large part driven by energetic and creative community partners that the program has inspired, and who in turn inspire the program. Now, regular workshops involve collaborations to engage teens in activities such as paper making, bookmaking, audio production, screen printing, and sewing. January 2016 marked the launch of [www.teenbubbler.org](http://www.teenbubbler.org), a repository for projects created by teens through Making Justice initiatives. In addition to MPL keeping statistics on program attendance and participation, success is now also evinced through the teen artist creations, performances, exhibitions, and activities which have been made more visible through the website.

MPL's myriad arts and maker programs, including the programming for court-involved youth, fall under the moniker of "Bubbler," referencing a colloquial term for water fountain and a metaphor for the creativity bubbling up across the MPL system. Making Justice, an arm of Bubbler programming, stands as a paradigmatic example of the ways in which this arts and maker programming is rooted in the three programmatic features. In contrast to traditional models of programming for court-involved youth, Making Justice is an important example of a community of learners who distinctly benefit from educational programs predicated on aesthetic expression, present enjoyment, and community.

## Programmatic Features: Cornerstones of Success

(See [Comic 2, supplementary file](#))

### Aesthetic Expression

Within current neoliberal logics, educational success is often measured, including in prison education, by future (post-release) employment. Creative expressions often get overshadowed by futures directed towards workforce development or being a “good citizen,” narrowly defined. For youth who are experiencing punitive treatment for past behavior and under pressure to be “better” in the future, the rigid binary of failure/success or right/wrong, and the ways in which those categories are measured and evaluated, can be daunting. In Making Justice, the learning goals diverge from those of job readiness or academic achievement defined as cerebral intelligence, often demonstrated through performance on standardized tests. This is enacted through Making Justice’s emphasis on aesthetic expression. From its inception, the team has embraced the motto, “people not stuff.” While libraries nationwide have been seeking funds to buy 3D printers and high tech equipment for library makerspaces (e.g. Willett, 2015), this programming model has focused instead on paying local artists to share their knowledge and craft. With no right answer imposed on the youth, they can be treated as experts of their own stories and their own ways of sharing.

Aesthetic expression as a foundational programmatic aim can open space for the celebration of difference. This focus reshapes the types of programming offered, tending towards programs that provide hands-on engagement and space to aesthetically express feelings and thoughts. This can be seen through the artist-in-residence program, which is committed to hiring artists as facilitators, and finding artists who are able to foster culturally relevant pedagogy and practices. Making Justice artists can offer longer term, multi-week programming to create exhibitions. For example, art professor Faisal Abdul’Allah led a fifteen-week workshop series for youth in NIP at his studio on the UW-Madison campus. The group devised a public art exhibition called Direct Message (May-August 2016), in which teens aimed to show the public a positive and complex view of their lives. They reflected on the way in which they have been represented in the mainstream, choosing to create and share their own larger-than-life portraits on the glass façade of the Central Library. They made avatars (pseudonyms) and QR codes for the public to connect to their messaging.



*Direct Message at Madison's Central Library, May-August 2016.*

<http://teenbubbler.org/creations/direct-message>

Through the emphasis on aesthetic expression we can see how Making Justice perceives and respects program participants. Too often, educational programs both inside and outside the justice system conceptualize youth in terms of deficits; children know less than adults and are assumed to need educating to sync up with adult logics (Stables, 2008). Mainstream culture in the U.S. often frames children of color or from lower socio-economic status as unruly, poor, underserved, uneducated, and in need to fixing (Nieto, Bode, Kang, & Raible, 2008). In comparison, Making Justice sees the teens as artists. By valuing Making Justice participants as artists in their own right, their art becomes a means to challenge the deficit-based perspective typically applied to them. With an appreciation that their perspectives and histories are assets that provide them with a unique vantage point, the programming shifts from service, helping them become the adults we want them to be, towards co-creation and honoring the teens that they are. Rather than using art to instrumentalize another purpose, the art takes the form of expressions created by people who are already valued. The exhibitions produced with professional artists are held to the same standard (and solicit the same respect) as art professionals in town, and openings draw crowds from various

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backgrounds. When the art is not solely geared towards serving youth, the audience of this art is able to be served by such powerful work.

## **Embracing the Present**

Education is predominantly a future-oriented endeavor, usually framed as something to prepare youth for a future aligned with society as-is. At best, education is a rehearsal space for learners to develop critical consciousness so they may someday create a more just and equitable world. Yet, even with equitable intentions, the future is privileged and prioritized over the present and the purpose of education is framed as something to be achieved at a later date. This approach can undermine the present needs of learners. In contrast to this, Making Justice has instantiated a model for learning that embraces the present, naming learning goals outside future-oriented systems.

*Making Justice* populations tend to be transient: for example stays at the Shelter Home range from 1-14 days. In response, many of the programs are designed as one-offs or single sessions. The same artist might return multiple times to facilitate a group where participants have changed, or participants may attend multiple Making Justice workshops with different artists or guest facilitators. These programs take the form of both “in-reach” visits to meet facilitators at the library or “outreach” programs offsite, including JDC, the Shelter School, and NIP programs held at community centers or artist studios. Unlike programs that prioritize the value of learning solely in terms of evincible growth over time, Making Justice tends to value more ephemeral outcomes, often outside the purview of education, such as exposure to aesthetically-driven experiences and enjoyment. To date, the impermanence of the participants in Making Justice has freed the program from contemporary overemphasis on measurement and assessment. It is difficult to assess learning in such a short amount of time. Thus, while many informal educators see these transient populations and drop-in style programs as barriers to in-depth learning, there is also an opportunity in this constraint to reframe learning goals to attend to the present.

Avoiding traditional forms of individualized learning assessment creates more room for socializing and collaboration. Amongst management and core staff, learning has been articulated as a social process rather than a content-driven procedure (Lakind, 2017). According to staff, “workshop leaders are more concerned with relationship building and connection to the community” (Interview, October 2016). Instead of asking that teens keep their jokes, comments, and camaraderie to themselves, socializing is seen as part of the

learning process, and facilitators are supported in developing learning goals that are more fluid and responsive to changing participants. For youth, socializing is crucial to wellbeing.

Rather than workforce development or specific skill development over time, the program staff aim to have teens “come to think of themselves as learners” (Interview, October 2016). Yet, Making Justice staff conceptualize learning as something that should be enjoyable, and often have notions of learning that differ from traditional learning in school. For example, Vieau asserts that his “favorite comment of all time was after a book trailer workshop, when someone wrote on a card ‘It was great to take a break from learning’” (Teen Bubbler). Vieau doesn’t believe that this program actually offered a break from learning, but rather that the learning that took place was such a different model that the participant didn’t even categorize it as such. As Vieau said, “In their head, like I’m envisioning, learning meant someone talking to me in a classroom in a seat and telling me stuff” (Teen Bubbler). For participants in Making Justice, learning might be associated with negative experiences in school; yet, staff are committed to promoting a conception of learning focused on the present in such a way that long-term retaining of knowledge doesn’t eclipse positive and regenerative experience in the moment.

## **Reaching Out and Stepping Back**

Another key feature of Making Justice is the emphasis on community partnerships, enabling an ever-expanding network to continually find new artists and guest facilitators. During its first official year (2014-2015), the program worked with 45 campus and community partners. These partners include community advisors who review program design and suggest resources; community programs that support service-learning placements; guest facilitators who help design and lead program sessions; juvenile justice agencies that supervise program teens; media art consultants who provide design and technical support; and secondary-school educators who facilitate curriculum development. To meet the needs of a diverse community, a coalition of partners can diversify learning styles; facilitation styles; facilitators’ cultural backgrounds; learning activities; artistic practices; and can make space for the visions of multiple librarians, facilitators, and collaborators.

Developing partnerships, however, wasn’t a matter of having partners find Making Justice, but necessitated library staff to reach out to build partnerships. This was framed well by one interviewee when he said, “Putting up the Bubbler flag led people to come a-knocking. The next steps were finding ways to shift the ‘predominately white knock’ when the program

began and people came a-knocking. Having the Bubbler to create a system for partnerships shifted that” (Interview, September 2017). In addition to a focus on clear and accessible pathways for partnerships, library staff dedicate time needed for meetings, offsite relationship building, and listening.

Reaching out operates in tandem with stepping back. Partners were not invited into a pre-determined program but asked to join as co-creators of the programs. Facilitators are not simply messengers, but come with their own personal missions and goals. Stepping back and trusting partners to come up with program content required library staff to forgo control and allow others into the process, revising and expanding the program as one that belongs to several organizations at once. This flexibility has given Making Justice an understanding of the current educational trends, without being beholden to them. As one interviewee commented, “we are not aligned to political whims, but it is nice to have a flavor to know where the wind is blowing” (Interview, September, 2017). For instance, NIP’s mission is to “intervene on the cycle of failure by assisting youth to ‘get on the right track’” (Dane County Department of Human Services). While this is in stark contrast to the asset-based perspective of Making Justice, multiple partners means multiple perspectives matter simultaneously.

Having such a range of facilitators enables a more diverse range of educational experiences than what might come from a singular organizational mission or staffing structure. Importantly, the teens themselves are also given voice and able to decide what they want to get out of any given program, with freedom to create on their own terms. There is no one-size-fits all. To see a future of equity and justice requires trust in facilitators and participants and a move away from a singular perspective. Programmatic success cannot be defined by a simple metric controlled by a small staff or narrow conception of “best practice.” Learning is diverse, and so too are participants’ definitions of success. To stay relevant to a diverse range of people demands connecting with a plurality of perspectives. Reaching out and stepping back shields against dominant views of learning determined without input from the community, the various stakeholders, and the learners themselves.

## **Liberatory Learning**

(See [Comic 3, supplementary file](#))

In *Golden Gulag* (2007), Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s book on prison expansion in California, she points to popular anti-prison slogans which position education as good and incarceration as

bad, such as “Education, Not Incarceration.” Education, however, is not an unquestionable good. As Paulo Freire (1970) posits, education is not neutral but always a moral and political activity. It can reflect contemporary views that are detrimental or beneficial depending on where someone is positioned in society and what you believe society should be. If education is not inherently good, it forces us to ask: what is good education? Who has access to educational opportunities and towards what end? Making Justice is inspired by a view of learning beyond market logics and deficit perspectives towards the reclamation of human dignity. This is not offered as a replicable procedure, but a proposition to strive for more generative and complicated educational designs. The three programmatic features discussed here are attainable for any program. They will look different in every situation. Making Justice might serve as inspiration to attend to learner’s expressions, experiences, and community. This model offers a conception of learning that, if more widely adopted, has the potential to reshape educational design and community programming in public libraries and beyond.

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